

Course Syllabus
Stone Speak: Nature as a Window to Humanity
IDH 3931 - 0189 - 'Stone Speak' - Fall 2016

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 9-10am or by appointment

Required Text: Annie Dillard. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. Harper Perennial; Revised edition (October 15, 2013) 176 pgs.

Annie Dillard. *Holy the Firm*.
Harper Perennial; Revised edition (December 30, 1998) 76 pgs.

Course Description:

"The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will." (Annie Dillard)

In 2014 President Obama awarded a National Humanities Medal to the accomplished writer Annie Dillard (Pulitzer Prize, 1974). Dillard's unique perspective captured in her narrative essays which put nature into conversation with humanity have helped her achieve such recognition. In this class, we will explore *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (accompanied by *Holy the Firm*), which represents some of Dillard's most compelling work. How might nature speak to us? And how can we look and listen in order to catch what might be heard? If one follows Annie Dillard into the woods, streams, oceans, islands, meadows, and prairies, and, if one listens closely enough, the sights and sounds of these places will have things to say. In these excursions, Dillard seizes opportunity after opportunity to draw on the mysteries of life and death in the natural world and beyond. In doing so, not only does she see the wonders that come to life when pausing long enough to reflect, but also she allows the non-human world to inform human experience, leading to a fuller picture of what it means to be human. In a remarkable way, then, readers of Dillard come away with both a greater appreciation of the world "out there" and a richer understanding of our humanity, in effect seeing the two worlds as more intertwined than what we often imagine.

This seminar style (discussion-based) course will provide students the opportunity to read and discuss Dillard's essays carefully and reflectively. We will consider Dillard's work alongside related short articles, poetry, and film. Most importantly, our reading will culminate in ongoing classroom conversation to work out Dillard's ideas. Additionally, students will participate in reflection through short writing assignments as they interact with the essays. Written

assignments: 500 word creative review essay, 1000 word final essay, 10 short (100 word) blog posts.

Course Objectives:

1. Read Dillard carefully and reflectively, treating Dillard as a conversation partner
2. Understand and articulate Dillard's ideas, placing in context of wider human experience
3. Engage the text **critically* and respond **personally*
4. Discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes both careful reading and careful listening

**Critically* does not mean negatively only. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful response and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read "Reading Charitably" in Canvas.

**Personally* means two things: 1) as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike about the book; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author. 2) As you interact with the reading, you allow the content to be filtered through your own experience in life.

A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility

This is a humanities class that raises *existential questions* related to the human experience. It necessarily probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don't always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to have a sustained conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). There should be room for articulation of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author's views as well as each other's, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Again, please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class in which we will think about the 'self' through a lens: pondering and learning about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that come to us through our reading and discussion.

Other helpful tips:

There will be several places in which religious ideas are fully in view. A little background in the Christian tradition would be helpful, but not mandatory. For those who do have knowledge and background in this tradition, we will lean on you to help shine light in places where we may not all have that context to think about.

More broadly, a freedom to think in large terms about life - even explicitly religious terms - will be useful to our conversation. This is not a facts and information class; this is a class in which we learn about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that we read.

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation 25% (250 points)

Weekly Blog Posts 30% (10 x 30 points = 300)

Review Essay 20% (200 points)

Final Essay 25% (250 points)

Each week we will read one or more chapters and sometimes a supplemental article, video, or poem. Students will be responsible to read and actively discuss the material each week, as well as write a blog post to be posted in discussion. *If enrollment is small enough, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.*

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

Attendance and Participation:

Since this is a discussion-based class, attendance is vital and assumed. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four absences.

In addition to attendance, students are expected to regularly contribute to classroom discussions. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class as well as interaction via online discussion in Canvas (e-learning). Regarding online Discussion, the instructor will monitor and note both the frequency of comments and the quality of engagement. A worthy goal would be to initiate a discussion, comment on a discussion, or pose questions weekly in the Discussion forum in Canvas. Further participation could include making connections between

class readings and your observations in culture (bringing to our attention related articles, books, poetry, film, artwork, thinkers, personal experiences).

In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by a student or small groups, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute, and not merely to listen, every week.

*Each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the blog posts (see next).

Blog/Journal: Students will keep a weekly blog with brief reflections (100 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. Students may consider using the following questions as prompts: (these are also helpful for class discussion)

- Which of Dillard's ideas most captured your attention this week?
- What do you find confusing or troubling in them?
- What do you find most compelling in her thinking?
- How would you criticize her thought? (basing your critique on good reasons)

Each weekly blog post should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class.

Blog URLs will be submitted weekly **AT MIDNIGHT THE DAY BEFORE CLASS, with instructor response periodically. Details will be provided in class. See assignment sheet in Canvas - Assignments.

Review Essay: film review essay - 500 words. Details given in class/e-learning.

Final Essay: 1000 words. Details given in class/e-learning.

Grading Scale: 93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

Classroom Decorum:

Students' full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all cell phones, computers, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, unless clearly related to class discussion (see instructor). This is a weekly conversation, and for us to have a good conversation we need everyone to be engaged in face to face fashion. I will avoid the "eyes in the sky" instructor if you will avoid "checking out". Get your money's worth from this class by staying attentive and engaged.

Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity. Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior. For more information, visit:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

Accommodations for students with disabilities:

If you require classroom accommodation because of a disability, you must first register with the Disability Resource Center <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>. The Disability Resource Center will provide documentation to you, which you then give to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

Course Schedule

Date	Reading/Content	Assignment Due
	how to have a class like this	
	Living Like Weasels (TST) The Force that Drives the Flower	blog due
	An Expedition to the Pole (TST)	blog due
	In the Jungle (TST) The Deer at Providencia (TST)	blog due
	Teaching a Stone to Talk (TST) On a Hill Far Away (TST)	blog due
	Total Eclipse (TST) Poem: Adventures in New Testament Greek: 'Nous' - Scott Cairns	blog due
	Lenses (TST) Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos (TST)	blog due
	A Field of Silence (TST) God in the Doorway (TST) Mirages (TST)	blog due
	Sojourner (TST) Newborn and Salted (HTF)	Creative Review Essay

	Aces and Eights (TST)	blog due
	God's Tooth (HTF)	blog due
	Film	
	Holy the Firm (HTF) / Film continued	blog due
	Wrap up - discuss Holy the Firm	final paper due